

## 15 MINUTES

## Letters on the Caloosahatchee

BY EVAN WILLIAMS

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The U.S. Post Office in Alva operates on the north bank of the Caloosahatchee River, sitting at the base of the Alva Bridge. Stately oak trees, hung with Spanish moss, shade the parking lot where a man known as Mr. Lee (he preferred not to give his full name) sells produce out of the back of his white Toyota truck almost every day.

"Everybody looks forward to (Mr. Lee)," said Margie Valla, Alva's postmaster.

It is small and semi-rural outpost, known to the Post Office as a Level 18.

"That's sort of the highest of the small offices," she said.

Ms. Valla has been there 3 1/2 years. She started with the Post Office 30 years ago in Fort Myers, and worked in the human resources department in South Fort Myers for the last 25.

The Alva Post Office's five carriers make about 3,000 deliveries each day on average, in and around Alva. From their outpost, they deliver north to the Hendry County line, southeast to Lehigh Acres, and west down Palm Beach Boulevard near where it reaches the Winn-Dixie shopping center on Buckingham Road.

Ms. Valla arrives for work at 7 a.m. boxing mail and helping sort the letters for the carriers. Her title, "Postmaster," sometimes refers to an adminis-

trative position at larger offices, but at smaller ones like this, it means she is involved in the labor of daily operations. All the mail has to be ready to take out by 9:30 a.m.

She also compiles reports based on the volume of mail for her district office in Tampa. That office covers the Suncoast District, in area codes starting in 339 (Alva), 341 and 342. Sometimes she drives around checking people's property, making sure mailboxes are at their correct height (36 to 42 inches).

The customers who visit the Alva Post Office often reflect the neighborhood population. One was a man in a truck and cowboy hat, jeans and a white T-shirt who rents a P.O. Box. "(The Post Office) is just a part of the territory out here," he said. "They do a good job. They're as good as gold as far as I'm concerned."

Retired residents from a nearby community called Oak Park are mostly seasonal. Ms. Valla said they often call her up before their return trip to Florida to check the weather. During the summer that Hurricane Charley struck the area, many called her to make sure everyone at the Post Office was safe.

"A lot of people will come by just to buy a few stamps, and talk to some of the clerks," Ms. Valla said.

But lately, the front desk, which is in a room the size of a closet, hasn't been busy. Ms. Valla attributes it to



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Margie Valla, postmaster at the Alva Post Office

the down economy. There also hasn't been a lot of development in the area recently, which suits her fine.

"I live in this community and that's a nice thing," said Ms. Valla, 59. "I came from a small town in Kentucky, so it reminds me of that. It's rural, it's

nice. Everybody knows everyone and they feel safe. It's not overbuilt like south Lee County."

Ms. Valla, who grew up 30 minutes north of Lexington, Ky., said in her honeyed Southern drawl, "Don't I sound like it?" Her voice sounded a little more like honey mixed with sand, since she'd spent the end of last week cheering the Florida Gators on to a national championship.

"I'm an avid Gators fan," she said.

She lives with her husband, Tom, in Alva. When she's not working, Ms. Valla also likes to play the piano — the same upright she was given lessons on as a little girl in Kentucky — and some of the same tunes. Her favorites include jazz and Beethoven's "Für Elise."

Ms. Valla keeps the lobby of the Post Office open from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and everyone takes a lunch break from 12 to 1 p.m.

As she left for lunch one day last week, Mr. Lee stood in his cowboy hat outside his truck, perhaps enjoying the blue-skied day and velvety breeze. A man in a white Mercedes-Benz got out of his car and walked up to him, eyeing the corn. ■

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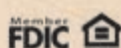
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